

# Councilman Callahan tries to get a political hot potato on the table

The Bethlehem Gadfly Police September 9, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts about the Bethlehem Police* 

“We are the people who approve the police budget. We say, ‘yes put your money toward yet another gun,’ or we could say we would like to scale back on that funding and put some social workers in here.”

Councilwoman Van Wirt

Gadfly has earlier noted this “what the hell” moment by Councilman Callahan, hoping it doesn’t presage petty conflict on Council that impedes the serious discussion about public safety that needs to take place. Gadfly would also repeat that, while an unfortunate term, what is meant by “defunding the police” is not scary. It means reallocating resources with a concomitant reallocation of duty in order to better carry out the mission of public safety. It is a proposed solution to a problem. Defunding/reallocation has honorably happened in various model cities around the country, as previously detailed in these pages. No Councilmember here has yet publicly advocated defunding/reallocating as far as Gadfly knows, but two Councilmembers have already announced firm positions against it before any public discussion has taken place and without reasons to substantiate their positions. That can smell of “politics.” Gadfly expects that all Councilmembers have an open mind and avoid prematurely foreclosing discussion.

*selections from Douglas Graves, “Defunding police issue continues.” Bethlehem Press, September 8, 2020.*

Councilman Bryan Callahan tried to get a political hot potato on the table for discussion during the city council virtual meeting Aug. 25, but was overruled by the Council President Adam Waldron. At the end of the meeting and during the new business portion of the agenda, Callahan asked Councilwoman Dr. Paige Van Wirt if she is “in favor of defunding the police.”

Callahan did not ask other council members for their opinions, but focused his interrogatory on Van Wirt. He insisted, to no avail against

Waldron's objection, that his question was within the purview of Robert's Rules of Order, but Waldron refused to let him continue.

Callahan had reduced a much more nuanced statement previously made by Van Wirt to a shorthand suitable for pointed sound-bytes, and has insinuated the subject during recent meetings.

Council has struggled with Callahan's confrontational style before, as he has attempted to get specific issues discussed publicly.

Van Wirt declined to respond to Callahan's question, but Callahan's effort highlighted one of most contentious demands being pushed by the local Black Lives Matter activists who came before the council July 7.

An inflated or mischaracterized call for defunding the Bethlehem Police Department seems to be creating a fissure in the solidly Democratic city council.

While discussing the proposed community Engagement Committee, when Jonathon Irons of West Market Street spoke in person (most members were attending virtually), saying he supports what he described as the people who recently marched through Bethlehem calling for "defunding of the police."

"We need to freeze the budget for the police department, including any new training initiatives coming out from this conversation must come from existing funding," said Irons, as recorded in the official minutes of the meeting. "We need a hiring freeze with no new officers. We need to end the use of paid administrative leave, all these things to defund police."

Councilwoman Van Wirt declined to elaborate further in a recent request by the Press.

As reported in the approved minutes of the July 7 meeting; "It was such a profound thing for her [Councilwoman Van Wirt] and she has to say until she really started listening throughout this whole engagement with Black Lives Matter and understanding what people of color go through, she did not understand what defund the police means. Of course, we all

know it does not mean exactly that but it means looking at where we are spending our money and how can we do things better.”

As reported in council’s minutes, Van Wirt said, “Our power of the budget is huge here. We start our budget talks in the fall ... to have any impact to what happens. We are the people who approve the police budget. We say, ‘yes put your money toward yet another gun’ or we could say we would like to scale back on that funding and put some social workers in here.”

While clearly there is no desire by any council members or administrators to actually defund the Bethlehem police department, that hasn’t stopped the idea from becoming a rallying point for citizens who have been led to believe that it is an issue being considered.

City council has passed a resolution calling for the community to be engaged in dialog with residents, police, schools and others seeking, as the Pledge of Allegiance says, “justice for all.”

A recent “Back the Blue” rally organized by Lehigh Valley Tea Party chairman and local attorney Thomas Carroll focused on a perceived threat to defund the Bethlehem Police. In a recent interview, Carroll conceded that no Bethlehem council member nor the mayor have called for defunding the police, but said he found the response by the council to demands of activists who attended the July 7 meeting to be “shocking and deceptive.”

Carroll, who is also the chairman of the Bethlehem City Republican Committee, said he didn’t want to see council make a “knee-jerk reaction” in responding to activists and start defunding the police department. Carroll said he supports the idea of council and the mayor funding social councilors to support the police.